

The Four Most Common Threats to Your Health

Are you living dangerously? You may not think so, but your lifestyle can put you at risk for a staggering list of serious diseases. For older adults, lifestyle has added importance in good health. Advancing age can make you vulnerable to illness. You can't stop aging, but you can change your lifestyle.

Here are four most common risks to your health and how you can turn a health risk to an advantage.

Smoking and tobacco use

Tobacco use, whether smoking cigarettes, cigars, a pipe, or chewing tobacco products, is the leading preventable cause of death in the United States. Tobacco smoke contains more than 40 known carcinogens and other toxic substances that can cause lung disease and many forms of cancer. Smoking can also rob your bones of vital nutrients, contributing to osteoporosis, and cause painful inflammation to arthritic joints. Ulcers and other digestive conditions can be aggravated by tobacco use too.

Poor diet

You are what you eat: eat unhealthy and you'll become unhealthy. Foods high in fat and cholesterol contribute to high blood pressure, high cholesterol and clogged arteries. Too much sodium is also a major risk factor for high blood pressure. The result is stress on the heart and circulatory system and increased risk of heart attack, stroke and heart failure.

A diet low in fiber may increase your risk of certain types of cancer. The same is true when you don't eat enough fruits and vegetables. Also, foods lacking the proper nutritional value may put you at risk. Diets low in calcium and vitamin D contribute to bone loss and osteoporosis. Regularly eating large meals works against proper digestion causing many nutrients to pass through you without being absorbed. Also, certain medications have side effects that can lead to nutrition deficiencies.

Obesity

Those extra pounds put you at risk for many diseases in many ways. Obesity contributes to diseases that claim more than 300,000 lives each year. Metabolic changes result from increased stores of fat and the chemicals these fat cells produce, contributing to diseases including diabetes, high blood pressure, gallbladder disease, and some forms of cancer. Overweight people put a strain on their bones and muscles as a result of the greater load their bodies must carry. The extra weight also contributes to osteoarthritis and sleep apnea, as well as increased risk of injury. Breathing is more difficult and, over time, your body may not get adequate oxygen.

Physical inactivity

Americans have steadily moved toward a sedentary lifestyle, resulting in serious risk to good health. Being inactive is part of a vicious circle: if you're inactive, you tend to gain weight and because you gain weight, you're more likely to be inactive. When you're inactive, your metabolism slows, your foods digest slower and less effectively, and you gain weight easier and faster. Your organs work less efficiently, putting you at risk of heart disease, diabetes and stroke.

Your bones and joints also suffer because you're not doing anything to keep them dense and limber. Osteoarthritis tends to set in faster and become more severe when you're inactive.

How you can take charge of your health

You can fight back against these threats to your health by becoming more active, quitting tobacco use, eating better and dropping pounds. Here are some resources that offer free information and programs to help you take charge of your health:

- Call **Blue Health Line** for free, confidential health information at **1-800-811-1764**, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- Call **Coordinated Care Management (CCM)**, a Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan Managed Care Program for those members who have diabetes, asthma, heart disease or high blood pressure and want additional information about those diseases at **1-800-768-6787** from 8:30-5pm daily.
- Call or visit your local chapter of the **American Heart Association** or visit their nationwide Web site at www.americanheart.org
- Visit the **National Institute of Diabetes & Digestive & Kidney Disease** at <http://www.niddk.nih.gov/>
- At your next visit, talk to your physician about ways to reduce your risk of disease from these four common threats.